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Lincoln's Rise to the Presidency

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Review

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Harris, William C. *Lincoln's Rise to the Presidency.* University Press of Kansas, $34.95 hardcover ISBN 9780700615209

Lincoln's Entry into Presidential Politics

William C. Harris has done it againùanother superb book on Abraham Lincoln. Building on his impressive body of work, as well as that of Douglas Wilson, Don Fehrenbacher, and others, Harris summarizes Lincoln's emergence and ascendancy from obscurity to the Presidency. As a Whig, a leader in the new Republican Party, and President-elect, Lincoln grew in authority, and Harris describes the many factors involved, from demographics in Illinois, the role of Chicago and railroads, to Lincoln's religious attitudes and antislavery sentiments. All this, Harris has accomplished with thoroughness and justice. This is an excellent analysis of Lincoln's political shrewdness and wisdom in the context of the times.

Regarding Lincoln's career, Harris examines several questions in vivid detail: Why did Lincoln run for the Illinois state House of Representative in 1854? Why in 1858 did he make the controversial House Divided speech? When did he conclude that he was a viable presidential candidate? What were the ramifications of the Lost Speech that Lincoln gave in Bloomington on May 29, 1856? In answering these and other questions, Harris interweaves aspects of Lincoln's law practice and family relations. Gratifying to the reader is the light Harris sheds on Lincoln's relationship with his father. He writes about Abraham's visiting his father, sending him money, and arranging to place a proper stone at the grave of his father. In one of the finer parts of the book, Harris parses the controversial House Divided Speech. He also details the Judd-Wentworth division in the Republican Party in Illinois. According to Harris, Lincoln excelled in resolving problems, keeping coalitions vibrant, and pursuing pragmatic politics, while at the same time maintaining his core values of cultural tolerance and moral opposition to slavery. Harris also examines Lincoln's efforts

to recruit Know Nothings into the new Republican Party without alienating German Americans and other ethnic groups. Harris faults Lincoln biographers and historians for failing to point out that Lincoln warned his friends against alienating the Know Nothings.

Harris points out a problem that many at the time saw in Lincoln. Lincoln had never held an executive office, he had served only one term in Congress, he was considered an enemy in the South, and about 46 percent of northern voters opposed him. How could such an inexperienced man manage the secession crisis? Harris credits Lincoln with a sober reality in the midst of nineteenth-century political passion, a trust in law as an orderly system opposed to mob rule. According to Harris, Lincoln's reliance on enforcing the law during the secession crisis was the conservative thing to do. The underlying thesis in this book, building upon Harris's previous work, is that Lincoln's rise to the presidency occurred only because of his conservative attitude. Although Lincoln referred to himself more than once as conservative, Harris tends to overuse the word, as if saying it often makes it so. What is conservatism? Lincoln asked in December 1859 at Leavenworth, Kansas. He answered, Preserving the old against the new. He insisted that Republicans, and not the Democrats, were the conservatives. In his address at Cooper Union in February 1860, Lincoln reiterated that the purpose of the Republican party is eminently conservative because its goal was to restore the institution of slavery to what the original framers of the government had intended. Harris disagrees with Harold Holzer's opinion that the Cooper Union address was radical. Harris persuasively argues that Lincoln wanted this speech to show Republicans in the East that he was the conservative alternative candidate for the presidency.

Harris's introduction explains the political labels he uses. Although acknowledging historians often describe Lincoln as moderate in his opposition to slavery, Harris points out that the word moderate was rare in mid-nineteenth century American parlance. In a nutshell, Lincoln was conservative because he was not radical. A radical, according to Harris, was one who called for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia, the repeal of the Fugitive Slave Act, and the enactment of state personal liberty laws to prevent the capture and return of blacks to the South. Some radicals favored outright abolition, and some favored civil rights for African Americans. But maybe moderate is still the correct word; the *Chicago Press and Tribune* expressed approval that Lincoln avoided extremes. He occupies the happy mean between that alleged radicalism which binds the older Anti-Slavery men to Mr. Seward, and that conservatism,

which dictates the support of Judge Bates. Allen C. Guelzo, in his political analysis of Illinois's senate districts, showed that the Republicans needed someone with a moderate (that is to say not abolitionist) position on slavery. Lincoln could be their man, but, according to Guelzo, first he had to prove his moderate credentials.

Harris unequivocally states that Lincoln's conservatism was unlike two other conservative views prevalent at the time. Lincoln was not reactionary and disapproved, albeit quietly, of the Know-Nothing type of conservatism. And, of course, Lincoln was not pro-slavery, the southern type of conservatism. Harris does not include other types of conservatism prevalent at the time, for instance the Democratic Party's issue of states' rights and limited government, or their championing of white supremacy. But labeling is never easy. Harris agrees that Lincoln viewed slavery as a moral wrong, and that he believed in equal opportunity for all. Was that conservative? Lincoln refused to accept any expansion of slavery in the territories, a position held by the conservative Blairs and Orville Browning, as well as the radical Salmon Chase. Lincoln supported the Wilmot Proviso. Was that conservative? While Democrats after 1840 denounced women's growing role in Whig politics, Lincoln encouraged their participation. Was that conservative?

In 1854 Lincoln publicly expressed his moral outrage at the institution of slavery, but he did not at that time call for its end in the South. Neither did he endorse black equality and rights. Still within four years, as Harris points out, Lincoln was proclaiming that African American should enjoy the natural rights expressed in the Declaration of Independence, including the right to enjoy the fruits of his labor. Harris believes that such an application of the Declaration reflected Lincoln's progressive brand of conservatism, one that held out hope in the eventual fulfillment of the Founders' republican ideals, even for blacks. Where does conservatism end and progressive conservatism begin?

Although many, including this author, believe Lincoln definitely changed and grew in office, Harris does not present this interpretation. Harris finds that Lincoln's plans for Reconstruction were conservative, again echoing the thesis in his important book, *With Charity Toward All*. Books about Lincoln, the Civil War, and Reconstruction are often about today. If the Civil War was the period in which American freedom was expanded for African Americans, it was the Reconstruction era which established institutions and bureaucracies that determined or undermined this freedom. And, as many civil rights attorneys and

historians have pointed out, the first Reconstruction is the basis for the second Reconstruction which is still with us. Hence, just as Harris intends, the application of the term conservative to Lincoln, whether correct or not, still reverberates today.

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